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SUBJECT: FINLAND: NATO DEBATE HEATS UP

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The March 2007 parliamentary election campaign is about to kick off and NATO is emerging as a key theme, just as it did in the January 2006 presidential elections -- and despite the efforts of several prominent politicians to muzzle public debate on this sensitive topic. This cable offers a snapshot of the current NATO debate in Finland, and subsequent reporting will examine the impact of NATO and security issues on both the elections and the new government that emerges. End Summary

Background: Is NATO Still the Political Kiss of Death?

¶2. (SBU) Finland's general Parliamentary elections are four months away (March 2007). As the election looms closer, the question of whether Finland should accede to NATO is generating renewed public interest and debate. President Tarja Halonen was re-elected in January by a surprisingly thin margin over her Conservative Party challenger, Sauli Niinsto.

Security policy -- and especially the NATO issue -- played a significant role in the presidential campaign. Halonen, a Social Democrat (SDP), had long opposed joining NATO and had expressed similar reservations about European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) planning. (At one point, she suggested that no EU military operations could be legitimate or justified in the absence of UN authorization, but subsequently moderated that stance.) Niinsto stopped short of advocating outright NATO accession, but his positive comments about possible future membership and his support for greater regional and international engagement by Finland were widely interpreted as de facto support for accession sooner rather than later.

¶3. (SBU) Pundits in Finland have long predicted that public support for NATO membership would be the kiss of death for any Finnish politician, and that debate rages on as the Parliamentary contests approach. With Niinsto almost having pulled off an upset, many now argue that his outspoken stance on security policy may have been the issue that separated him from Halonen and others and captured the imagination of voters. Those same voices hold that although Halonen won, her poorer than expected showing resulted in part from a perception that her idealism was coloring her foreign policy judgment too much and leading to unrealistic "ivory tower" policies that risked isolating Finland from the European mainstream. However, others -- including leading Conservative Party strategists -- tell us that NATO and security policies actually were the kiss of death for Niinsto. In their version, had he not been so forward leaning in these areas, he

would have picked up the additional 2.5 percentage points he needed and toppled Halonen. In particular, Conservatives now say, Finnish Center Party voters, who favored many of Niinisto's other arguments, remained staunchly opposed to NATO

membership and reacted to Niinisto's NATO arguments either by voting for Halonen or by staying home. Opinion polls still show a large majority of Finns opposed to NATO membership, but

opposition remains especially high among the largely rural voters who make up the vast majority of the Center Party's base. One final factor, according to both our Center and Conservative Party contacts, was the overwhelming and still passionate opposition to the US invasion of Iraq. Although polls indicated that most Finns believed NATO membership should remain a viable option, and that Finland would inevitably accede at some point, they still link NATO to the US, and the war remains a factor in voters' calculations.

The Press Kicks Off This Season's Debate

¶4. (SBU) Campaign season for the March 2007 contests does not even begin until January 1, but Finland's press corps kicked things off in October when Finland's two largest newspapers --

the Helsingin Sanomat (Helsinki) and Aamulehti (Tampere) -- ran their first-ever editorials officially advocating NATO accession for Finland. The two big dailies were followed quickly by several smaller publications. The newspapers' argument for accession was based on the fact that Finland is an active participant in NATO operations in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and elsewhere but that regardless of what shape or form an enhanced NATO partnership might take after the Riga Summit, lack of full membership would relegate Finland to continued second-class citizen status -- without the role in

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decision-making, operational planning, and intelligence-sharing that the country desires. A secondary theme that was addressed obliquely was renewed concern over Russia. Finnish politicians and journalists alike are cautious when alluding to any possible threat from the Russian bear, and concerns about Russian backsliding on human rights and democracy are not the driving force behind the current debate; however, a level of concern about recent trends in Moscow is always a hidden subtext in any Finnish debate on security policy.

Lipponen and Kaariainen Square Off

¶5. (SBU) Hard on the heels of the editorial staffs, two of Finland's most prominent politicians -- one historically pro-NATO, the other a staunch opponent -- weighed in publicly.

Social Democratic (SDP) Speaker of Parliament Paavo Lipponen, the longtime advocate, said that Finland would be hard pressed

to defend itself in the future without help from NATO. However, Lipponen also knows that NATO is not a winning issue for his Social Democratic party, largely because its other heavy hitters -- namely President Halonen and Foreign Minister

Erkki Tuomioja -- strongly oppose Finland's joining NATO.

For that reason, while holding true to his convictions, Lipponen also tried to pre-empt a discussion of NATO during this campaign, suggesting that the real debate should wait until after the 2007 elections. Then, possibly, a more NATO-friendly Parliament might be seated, and leading NATO detractors like Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja (SDP) and Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen (who is constrained by his Center Party constituency) might be removed to less powerful roles.

¶6. (SBU) Lipponen's remarks were followed by those of Defense Minister Seppo Kaariainen (Center Party), who told journalists

that by 2020, Finland would be unable to maintain its current

system of territorial defense without large increases in shrinking defense budgets or NATO membership. Kaariainen's comments were initially noteworthy, because he has never favored NATO accession and generally shied away from entering the public fray. They also prompted immediate attacks. FM Tuomioja blasted the DefMin for "threatening" the GoF with the

inevitability of NATO membership. Although Tuomioja didn't use the word "blackmail," the gist of his remarks was that Kaariainen was indeed blackmailing the government for greater defense expenditures by presenting NATO as the only option in the absence of bigger budgets for the military. The FM said that joining NATO was a political issue, not an economic one; and could not be made on the basis of budgetary considerations

alone. President Halonen predictably seconded Tuomioja's position saying there was no need for Finland to join NATO, no

need for further debate at the present time, and no plans for the GoF to revisit the issue in the near future. PM Matti Vanhanen (who is a committed trans-Atlanticist but knows he stands to gain nothing from his own base by favoring NATO membership) initially stayed clear of the public sparring, but

later showed solidarity with the FM and President, declaring that NATO issues should not be discussed during the campaign.

Lesser political luminaries such as former communist Jaako Lakso, an outspoken member of Parliament from the Left Alliance, also added their voices to those decrying Kaariainen's assessment.

¶7. (SBU) Kaariainen and Lippinen did not respond publicly to any of the commotion; but sources from across the political spectrum now tell us that Kaariainen's gambit, in particular, was never intended as a show of support for Finland's NATO accession. Instead, they said, it was a clever means of allowing others such as Halonen and Tuomioja to publicly shut down the NATO debate. Liisa Jaakonsaari, the SDP chair of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (and, like Lippinen, a strong supporter of NATO membership, was unusually harsh in her public criticism of the GoF's position -- especially that of Halonen -- and she was furious with Kaariainen.

Jaakonsaari lamented in particularly the fact that Kaariainen's response seemed designed to allow Halonen and others to cut off all debate on the subject. As another MP put it, Kaariainen "certainly hasn't changed his tune on NATO,

he just wants a bigger defense budget." Max Jakobson, Finland's most respected ex-diplomat and foreign policy "grey eminence," also spoke out against the government's negative

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assessment and attempt to close down the dialogue. The career minister said that it was unfortunate the GoF was trying to "close the door" on NATO membership for the foreseeable future and implied that some NATO membership opponents were afraid of an open debate about accession.

Even the Bear Growls

¶8. (SBU) Not to be left out, Russian officials took advantage of the opportunity to register their interest. Russia's ambassador to Finland said that Moscow was "satisfied" with what he described as "Finland's clearly stated policy" to not apply for membership in the near future. The visiting Chief of the Russian General Staff went somewhat further; speaking at a Helsinki press conference alongside his Finnish counterpart, the general opined that Finland should consider "the consequences of joining the alliance" on the Finnish-Russian bilateral relationship. He referred to the Baltic states as having been turned into "worrying gray areas" by their decision to join NATO.

Comment

19. (SBU) If nothing else, the NATO and security policy debate promises to be a major theme in the upcoming parliamentary campaign, despite the efforts of several senior politicians to

muzzle it. We will follow it closely and, on the public diplomacy side, continue to do our part to dispel rumors, correct misimpressions and simply offer the facts regarding the US position. Subsequent reporting will examine how the campaign and the election results will impact the Finnish

NATO

debate going forward.

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